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Ambulance opposition shows leadership gap

By Tribune editorial board

A local group called Citizens for Responsible Government filed petitions in opposition of a city proposal to launch its own ambulance service.

But if local leaders truly were listening to people's concerns, citizens wouldn't have to use the petition process to prevent their local government from engaging in controversial and ill-advised policies.

City officials have proposed purchasing two ambulances and staffing one. Although the city contends that the ambulances would not compete with the private Tri-State Ambulance service — or lead to a degradation of local service — we have our doubts.

It might be argued that the city did listen to residents because it shelved the ambulance idea. But the idea is far from dead, and temporarily stopping it was more of a strategic rather than substantive strategy.

At present, La Crosse is served by a private ambulance service that does not rely on property tax money to operate. All ambulances are staffed by paramedics.

La Crosse firefighters, trained as emergency medical technicians, are generally first to arrive on the scene. That's their role, as first responders, to stabilize the situation.

Our concern is that the last time La Crosse had two different ambulance services there were two standards of care — paramedic care in the urbanized area and less comprehensive emergency medical technicians for everyone else.

How do we know a city ambulance service would not fracture the existing system — leading to a downgrading of service in some areas?

The citizens who collected 3,500 signatures to force the ambulance proposal to referendum were concerned about costs and quality of service.

If city officials were truly exercising leadership, they would have listened to those concerns before being forced to with a referendum vote.